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Preludes to an Exhibition

Wernsdörfer, Martina

Abstract: In the exhibition “Tokens of the Path – Japanese Devotional and Pilgrimage Images: The Wilfried Spinner Collection (1854–1918),” (November 28, 2014 until May 17, 2015), the University of Zurich’s Ethnographic Museum presents Japanese religious paintings and prints that were collected by the Swiss theologian and pastor Wilfried Spinner, who worked as a missionary in Japan from 1885 to 1891. This collection is accessible to the public for the first time. In what follows, the curator of the Asia collections Martina Wernsdörfer provides insight into the story behind the exhibition.

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Cover

Members of the protest movement "Svabhimani
Shetkari Sanghatana" in Nagpur (Maharashtra,
India)

Photo: Silva Lieberherr

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David Mervart (p. 5), Roman Benz (pp. 7–9,
24–25), Ethnographic Museum at the University
of Zurich (p. 21)

Preludes to an Exhibition

In the exhibition “Tokens of the Path – Japanese Devotional and Pilgrimage Images: The Wilfried Spinner Collection (1854–1918),” (November 28, 2014 until May 17, 2015), the University of Zurich’s Ethnographic Museum presents Japanese religious paintings and prints that were collected by the Swiss theologian and pastor Wilfried Spinner, who worked as a missionary in Japan from 1885 to 1891. This collection is accessible to the public for the first time. In what follows, the curator of the Asia collections Martina Wernsdörfer provides insight into the story behind the exhibition.

Martina Wernsdörfer

The Ethnographic Museum’s exhibit “Tokens of the Path” has a lengthy

backstory related to Wilfried Spinner’s family connections to Zurich; a growing interest in Japanese-Buddhist objects in European museums; and the liberal currents in 19th century Christian theology.

Born in 1854 in Bonstetten near Zurich, Wilfried Spinner studied theology at the University of Zurich and came into contact with liberal theological circles and, specifically, the pastor Ernst Buss. These groups pursued a version of Christianity free of dogma and open toward other religions, though not to the exclusion of missionary work. Having co-founded the General Evangelical-Protestant Missionary Society in Weimar in 1884 with Buss and others, Spinner traveled to Japan in 1885 as the

first missionary commissioned by the organization. He was simultaneously a pastor with duties abroad, operating in service of the Grand Duke of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach and working with German-speaking congregations in Tokyo and Yokohama.

In Japan, he made use of local contacts in order to gain familiarity with religious ideas, deities, and customs. Over the years, he acquired some one hundred cultic and pilgrimage images—paintings and printed amulets (Jap. *ofuda*)—that he used for religious-historical studies. He had the contents explained and left behind written notes on some images. The notes consist mainly of transliterated Japanese terms, accompanied at times by brief explanations in German. In April of 1891, Spinner returned to Europe with his collection. From Switzerland he soon moved to Germany and was eventually promoted to the level of General Superintendent of the Saxony Grand Ducal church council. He died in Weimar in 1918.

Religious actions and forms of belief

Because of Spinner’s family ties to Zurich, his collection finally found the way to the Ethnographic Museum. While in Switzerland he was married to Bertha Stoll, whose brother was Otto Stoll, a professor of geography and ethnography at the University of Zurich. From 1889 to 1898, he was also the director of the ethnographic collection (today, the Ethnographic Museum). Otto’s youngest daughter Eva Stoll worked from 1962 to 1975 as the museum’s Asia curator and, after retiring, she established contact between Spinner’s relatives and the Ethnographic Museum, which in 1985 received eighty image-scrolls from Spinner’s collection. This donation of the images turned what were formerly objects of personal study into objects of academic research in a museum environment.

When Hosei University and the University of Zurich’s Japanology de-



Paper amulets issued by the temples situated along the Kannon pilgrimage route in the Western provinces.

partment in 2010 asked the Ethnographic Museum to join them in an international research project on Japanese-Buddhist objects in European collections, it was a chance to engage the image-scrolls anew. With the support of numerous specialists from Japan, it has been possible over the past three years to understand central elements of “the Wilfried Spinner collection,” as well as aspects of its historical context. The eighty image-scrolls proved to be key in approaching a variety of religious actions and forms of belief. They offer a strongly panoramic profile of Japan’s religious landscape in the Edo period and Meiji era. A fitting occasion to display the images arose in 2014 with the 150th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and Switzerland, an event that provided an opportunity to present in both the exhibition and in publication the research results of Tomoe Irene Maria Steineck and Martina Wernsdörfer, respectively, the guest curator and the curator of the Ethnographic Museum’s Asia collections.

Junior Scholars

With the last Fall semester, several postdocs took up their research at the URPP Asia and Europe:

Dr. Rivka Eisner (performance studies)
Performance Avant-Gardes: Memory, Cultures, Contemporary Arts, and Social Change in Vietnam and South-east Asia

Dr. Elisa Ganser (Indian studies)
The Place of Art in Indian Religious Thought: On the Soteriological Value of Acting, Singing and Dancing in Abhinavagupta’s Work and Beyond

Dr. Melek Saral (political science)
Discourses and Practices of Human Rights in the Arab Spring Countries: Islamisation or Westernization of Human Rights?

Research on Modernity in Asia

On 31 August, 2015, Professor Sven Trakulhun left the University of Zurich after serving with distinction for six years as an assistant professor in the fields of Asian history and European-Asian relations, where he conducted research and taught effectively by introducing students to new subjects and perspectives.

Jörg Fisch

Sven Trakulhun arrived in Zurich well prepared for these tasks. After completing his doctorate at Giessen in 2000, where he wrote a thesis (published in 2006) on Siam and Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he was granted several scholarships, fellowships, and research positions at Potsdam, Galway (Ireland), and Konstanz, concentrating on European-Asian relations. His research at these institutions culminated in his Konstanz *Habilitation* of 2011, “Asiatic Revolutions: Europe and the Rise and Fall of Asian Empires, 1644–1818,” which will soon be published. While in Zurich, he also published several articles on a wide range of Asian-European, Southeast and South Asian history.

Stimulating research

Equipped with this academic background, Trakulhun was destined for the position as an assistant professor at the URPP Asia and Europe. He soon became one of the supporting pillars of the research network and his work as one of the coordinators of the URPP’s Research Field 2, “Entangled Histories” was highly regarded. He stimulated research both in his research field and in cooperation with institutions in other countries, particularly by organizing a number of international workshops and conferences that addressed topics such as the transnational history

of ideas, the history of the Enlightenment in Europe and Asia, and with problems of biography: „Transcultural Bodies – Transboundary Biographies: Border Crossings in Asia and Europe“ (2010) and „Biography Afield in Asia and Europe“ (2012) to name just two of them.

Encounter between East and West

An important part of Trakulhun’s job involved his duties in the Department of History of the University of Zurich’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. In this capacity, he contributed to a broad range of work, especially through his teaching on multiple academic levels that included the university program Master of Advanced Studies in Applied History. Additionally, he held public lectures for a general audience. He also supervised several masters and doctoral theses. In these activities, he demonstrated his giftedness as an academic teacher and his versatility in numerous historical subjects. His main interest was always the encounter between East and West, and he showed a keen interest in subjects long neglected, such as Asia’s contribution to “modernity.” His own cultural background aided him in this line of study, the ripest fruit of which, at this point, is his *Habilitation*, which is a sophisticated investigation into the history of a difficult concept. He painstakingly shows how Europe appropriated a central feature of modernity without succeeding to monopolize it fully.

The University of Zurich, most especially the URPP and the Department of History, has good reason to be grateful to Sven Trakulhun for confronting them with an expansive, intriguing, and always fascinating field of history. We all wish him inspiration, joy and success.